

Multidisciplinary artist and street artist Maya Gelfman's work explores the unstable relationship between transformation and permanence providing such elusive notions with a lively gaze on contemporary art making. In her recent bodies of work that we'll be discussing in the following pages, her unconventional approach draws the viewers into an area in which the perceptual dimension and imagination merges together into coherent unity. One of the most convincing aspects of Gelfman's work is the way it shows that opposites are bound together, providing the viewers with a multilayered experience in which stability and uncertainty find an unexpected point of convergence. We are very pleased to introduce our readers to her refined artistic production.

*1) Hello Maya, and a warm welcome to ARTiculAction. We would start this interview posing you some questions about your background: you have a solid formal training and you graduated with a BA (B.Des) from the Shenkar Academy in visual communication. How has this experience influenced your evolution as an artist? And in particular, how does your cultural substratum due to your Israeli roots inform the way you relate yourself to art making and to the aesthetic problem in general?*

Hello and thank you for having me.

Whenever a young student asks for my advice, I say that there are many ways to go about being a professional artist. The academy is definitely a well compressed route to theoretical and practical basis for art-making, but it's certainly not the only way.

It's like a beehive, a structure full of variables and opportunities, that might prove to be dense and even messy at times. Each one takes this challenging experience differently. In that spirit, I must say that I've learned a lot being a student but some invaluable lessons weren't written in the curriculum at all. They had to do with standing my ground and claiming my own voice.

I used my time there to absorb and experiment as much as I could. Naturally that approach didn't always pay off, at least immediately. More than once, my experiments ended in grand disasters and getting harsh yet constructive criticism. But it was more important for me to create something meaningful and original than to be praised. I kept pushing myself beyond fear and gradually learned to be confident in my actions. When my final project (thesis), in which I created a massive installation that temporarily changed the architecture of our floor, was selected to exhibit at a huge expo and then directly led to exhibiting at the TLV Museum of Art the following year, I knew my instincts were spot-on and that my determination was rewarded.

My roots are actually both Israeli and Russian. My parents emigrated from the Soviet Union in the early 70's, and I was born and raised in Israel. Growing up, I was faced with the various facets of cultural diversity and with how it feels to be an outsider.

Being an artist in Israel, well... Even though it's a small country it's a very fertile ground for creativity and inspiration. Due to the fact that it encompasses such extreme situations and heterogeneous people. It's a boiling cauldron in which history, cultures, ideals and conflicts are all evident and densely mixed together. It caters a fast current of transformations, geographically, architecturally and socially. In a way, this place always leaves you hungry.

No matter how one might look at the situation, in a country that is exhausted by wars and busy surviving art seems to be grasped as a luxury, so dedicating oneself to creating art is not trivial at all. Having said that, Israel is far from being the image that's depicted by the news. So for what it's worth, I think that this is exactly what drives so many people here to search for ever new and alternative ways to express themselves.

*2) You are a versatile artist and your approach encapsulates several techniques, revealing an incessant search of an organic symbiosis between a variety of disciplines and viewpoints. The results convey together a coherent sense of unity, that rejects any conventional classification. Before starting to elaborate about your production, we would suggest to our readers to visit [www.mayagelfman.com](http://www.mayagelfman.com) in order to get a synoptic view of your multifaceted artistic production: while walking our readers through your process, we would like to ask you if you have ever happened to realize that such multidisciplinary approach is the only way to express and convey the idea you explore.*

The search for symbiosis is apparent in every aspect of my life and even more so in my practice, since it explores, reflects and interprets life. I believe that every process is an ongoing movement between actual experiences and yet unfulfilled intentions. We establish perceptions based on firsthand or inherited impressions and measure that against our dream, thus creating a purpose and a path. This movement can be described as a line unfolding in space. The path between where I came from, where I am and where I wish to be. The works that I create outline this path and my way manifests itself as I go along. So while I'm trying to decipher how and what to do next, I naturally intertwine materials, play with concepts and examine multiple techniques.

*3) For this special issue of ARTiculAction we have selected Shell, a stimulating installation that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article. What has at once caught our attention of this work is the way it accomplishes the difficult task of creating an harmonic mix between a figurative, realistic approach to the evokative reminders conveyed by the materials you combine together: when walking our readers through the genesis of Shell, would you shed a light about the way you combine together the materials you choose for your works?*

My ideas first come to me as visual fragments and a physical sensation, usually in my hands, of something abstract materializing into tangible form. I start to lay down conceptual and technical premises and then I work my way from there. Funny yet appropriate we should start with the *Shell*, as this specific piece actually encapsulates exactly that. It's the artistic womb from which I emerged, a metaphysical pocket of creation itself.

I started it by lying on the floor in a fetal position and drawing a line around myself, much like a child would draw a line around their palm and fingers. My choice of materials was

simultaneously intuitive and cognizant. Introducing different materials layers the works with sub-meanings and shades. It enables me to charge them with the origins of each material while also constituting a new significant synthesis.

But I also choose my materials acting upon instincts and what feeling they convey to me. I'm looking to find a material that harbors the essence of an idea rather than the ability to best simulate it.

I then continued to construct a "bony" structure around my initial fetus form, using iron net and twisted cloth hangers. I wanted to create a cocoon-like shape, then split it open and turn it into an organism that can sustain a memory of life. For this end I used red wool, a material that has a fuzzy almost biological quality to it. I cut each thread by hand and tied them one by one to the skeleton, so that the insides my empty shell were weaved through and through with red plumage. I ended up using more than 300,000 pieces of yarn, and this stage took 6 months. The long and Sisyphean process served as an embodiment of the meticulous process in which a shell is created in nature, one crisp layer at a time.

The *Shell* was exhibited in a way that frames a particular space which is neither closed nor open. It invited the viewers to go around it but also to step inside, creating a contemplative inner space that allowed the inhabitants to observe themselves and their surroundings. And yet, once inside, the viewer wasn't alone. A present absence was strongly felt, as the work encased an imprint of the first dweller of this cell, thus inviting the sensitive resident to share my space.

*4) Your practice is centered on the exploration of the conflictual relationships between beauty and crudeness, weakness and strenght, showing how such apparently antithetical notions actually include a part of each other. We have highly appreciated the way your approach goes beyond a merely interpretative aspect of the contexts you refer to: your works could be considered as visual and tactile biographies that unveil the elusive boundary in which reality and imagination blend together. As the late Franz West did in his installations, your pieces show unconventional aesthetics in the way it deconstructs perceptual images in order to assemble them in a collective imagery, urging the viewers to a process of self-reflection. Furthermore the fruible set of elements you draw from universal imagery triggers the viewers' primordial parameters concerning our relation with physicality: as Gerhard Richter once remarked, "my concern is never art, but always what art can be used for": what is your opinion about the functional aspect of Art in the contemporary age? Maybe one of the roles of an artist could be to reveal unexpected sides of Nature, especially of our inner Nature... what's your view about this?*

I'm attracted to art because it's a two-way mirror, allowing parallel realities to not just co-exist but to enhance one another. Art can and should provide a place of transcendence, beauty, tenderness and even comfort while simultaneously evoking soul-searching, gut-wrenching feelings. When I was four years old, I had a near death experience while having an open heart surgery. That threshold rendezvous left me convinced that opposites are bound together. In my works I strive to encompass and echo this duality.

They stem from that simultaneous sense of vertigo and stability.

The diffusive exchange that transpires between the inner and outer worlds is at the heart of my *workstation* installation. The red yarn, egg-like coils are nesting at the foot of a table (it's my actual studio work-table). They symbolize subconscious potential and a source of conception. A single umbilical cord connects them to the workstation, where they are materialized into external forms.

In *The machine* installation, the cord (a single, continuous thread) passes through an assembly of wheels, cogs and metal gears. This time it can be read as the transition of the human factor through the mechanisms of a system. The apparatus represent functions of a body, and so the 'thread of life' is the blood line that drives and revives the machine. It may seem as if the harsh metallic in-and-outs might tear it apart, but as the red thread runs full course it marks the passage of time and distance. When it comes out the other side intact, it manifests endurance and becomes a whole heart.

Still, I deem that the details in themselves are almost meaningless. My work doesn't revolve around my personal story but rather uses it as a trigger and a catalyst to create objects and spaces that encourage deep contemplation. Through them I want to deal with the dichotomy that one reality can reflect many and that there is no one definition. In that spirit I explore how extremities collide and more importantly how this collision ignites a change, thus opening a window of opportunity for something new to occur. I see my role as an artist to open as many of these windows as I possibly can. I wish to be more than an observer, more than a critique of phenomenons and cultural mechanisms. My goal is to suggest and hopefully generate a shift in perspectives. I want to facilitate an honest discussion of fundamental issues such as pain, violence, innocence, diversity and acceptance. All the things we consider clichés gained this dubious status by virtue of being simple truths. These truths, while subtly altering from person to person, still hold a common thread between us all.

*5) Your works convey both metaphoric and descriptive research and the way you combine elements from environment with evocative symbols, as you did in Black Birds - the one that got away creates a compelling narrative that invites the viewers to a multi-layered experience. A distinctive mark of the way you convey emotions into your works is the construction of a concrete aesthetic from experience, memories and symbols, working on both subconscious and conscious level. So we would take this occasion to ask you if in your opinion, personal experience is absolutely indispensable as part of the creative process? Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?*

What makes a thing personal? What makes it generic? There is no neutral ground. Try as we may, our premises and reactions could never be completely objective and I don't believe they should. By being aware of this inevitable subjectivity I choose to seek a wider point of view, while reminding myself that it'll none-the-less be partial. Making a choice is an active statement and what develops responsive individuality. *Black Birds - the one that got away* was exhibited in a deserted military base on the Israel/Lebanon border. The hills

that are seen from the windows are beyond the borderline, but purely geographically speaking - they are a continuous part of the view. It's the same piece of earth and the borders are man-made. I don't consider myself a political artist, at least not in the traditional sense, but the personal is political and my introspection has a trans-formative intention. I examine things also in the light of the collective conscious, as I try to reconcile conflicts and contradictions, and to ask how gaps can become motivators and the source of strength.

The image of birds taking to flight is a familiar one. It epitomizes an idea of hope, freedom and movement. It outlines the desire to break free and fly high. The yarn balls act as chains, they demonstrate a powerful tension between the pulling force of the ground and the endless promise of the open sky. That tension refers to inhibitions, restraints and the dissonance between wanting to move on and the things that hold us back - whether they are political, geographical, socioeconomic, gender-based or personal.

In the late 1990s, I served in the army as a field medic. I was stationed just outside Ramallah, a major Palestinian city. In this position, I had the privilege and obligation to land emergency medical help to both sides.

I'm no expert on these matters and don't presume to pass judgment. I have my opinions but am also well aware that things are never black and white. I've encountered so many shades of grey and facets of humanity, and these gave me a better understanding of systems and forces. It was a humbling lesson in both being powerless and about the power that individuals can possess. How seemingly small gestures have a rippling effect and can become the power of many - for better or for worse.

*6) Your paintings seem to move the viewers, addressing them to get free of the variety constraints that affect contemporary unstable societies. While exhibiting a captivating vibrancy, your colorful and expressive works seem to reject an explicit explanatory strategy: rather, you seem to offer to the viewer a key to find personal interpretations to the feelings that you convey into your collages... this quality marks out a considerable part of your production, that is in a certain sense representative of the conflictual relationship between content and form: how much does your own psychological determine the nuances of tones you decide to use in a piece and in particular, how do you develop a painting's texture? Moreover, any comments on your choice of "palette" and how it has changed over time?*

You said it well, art as a key to find personal interpretations.

I perceive myself as a channel. I tap into the creative energy that was here long before me and will flow on long after I'm gone. I really do feel privileged and blessed by this open connection to the marrow of subconsciousness. I perceive my works as a testimony of my experiences, whether first-hand or cultural. In a sense, I believe that a good work of art is much bigger than the artist that makes it. Of course there is a direct reflection of my own expansion in my work, but it's just the beginning of a story and not the whole of it.

Art changes and evolves. While being "in progress", it's in the artist's territory.

But once accomplished, it stands out in its own right and it's up to the work to establish meaningful interactions with its surroundings. I always leave spaces for others to fill. My works are not hermetically sealed. On the contrary - they aim to be extended and amplified.

So naturally I also don't see it as a conflict relationship between content and form, but rather as an interlaced network in which every movement or intention, both physical and metaphysical, leaves an impression and dictates a certain narrative and atmosphere. I use aesthetics to lure the viewers and sooth first reactions, in order to reveal a deeper meaning that might be perceived as deterring otherwise. But I never aim for shock value just for it's own sake. Acknowledging the complexity is a path to finding catharsis. In my early drawings, which I did in the years after my graduation, the color scheme was naive and minimalist (mind you that as a student I was "all over the place" when it came to colors and materials). At the time I felt that I could make up an entire universe with a pencil and a red pen. And so I did, in a subtle yet disturbing way, I drew figures and situations floating in white space.

With time, layers appeared and my drawing became increasingly obsessive. The bare color pallet gained some flesh as I struggled to weave together past, present and future. It was a time that I plunged head first into a personal abyss, mapping my journey and examining the findings, so to make some sense of it all. I started using mixed media again. The red, white and grayish lead were accompanied by black, gold, silver and fluorescent yellow. I used thread with which I meticulously embroidered thin papers, cut outs made with aluminum foil and parchment, and so on. I wanted it to appear as a drawing at first glance but the longer one looked at it, the mixed media, bits and pieces were exposed.

My compository tangle was forming and becoming labyrinthine. Around that time I became an active street-artist as well. In the streets I honed a technique of drawing with yarn on walls that became a sort of visual trademark of mine. While drawing those fluent yarn lines I started asking myself questions such as: Can lines lose their dependency on a background? Is the canvas supporting or binding? As a result, I created installations that exhibited fast sketches with wool lines that are suspended in mid air. Artistically speaking, working simultaneously in public spaces and in 'white cubes' keeps me on my toes. It raises theoretical and technical questions that broaden my way of thinking. I find myself looking for ways to translate the subjects and materials with which I work in the studio to a street context - facing the non-sterile, noisy, dense reality it presents. The solutions I find open my mind and my eyes. Which bring us to the past couple of years, in which I've been fascinated with transformations. The Sisyphean process evolved and changed into a new set of rules, ones that dictated different materials, gestures and speed. I started using colorful acrylic paints and combining them with printmaking techniques and industrial markers that are often used on the streets.

*7) By the way, you once stated that your paintings are created in one continuous session, as a dance ritual: would you shed light on this aspect of your process? We are particularly*

*interested about the channel of communication that you establish together between the works from a series.*

The series that was created that way is the one I've referred to in the last paragraph. Large, colorful and expressive paintings, made in broad gestures and overlapping layers. In their making I sought to break free from familiar patterns and push beyond my comfort zone. This series has basically two ground rules:

**duration and speed.** Each work is limited to one continuous session. That is a period of designated time, ranging from one to several days and nights, during which I keep as much as possible within the domain and the mindset of the work. If it doesn't feel finished after a session, I put it aside and move on.

**Flexible disposition.** Like meditating, I let all that comes be and become.

Automatism and scrutiny - I observe, think, feel and sense, but I don't dwell on either. Most importantly, I don't stop painting to give any of them time enough to mature and take over the wheel. Instead, I gather them all onto the paper and continue to work without making order of things. The painting is the one that leads the way as it develops. In other words, I immerse myself completely in a meditative process of laying out layers, while keeping explicit analysis at a hands reach, just hanging a few inches above the canvas. There is a clear general connection between the new and previous works. The "handwriting" is recognizable as well as the meta issues. However, specifically, every series is linked to a certain frame of mind and is derived from an initial vision. The vision establishes context and distributes components or fractals. In a way, the visions act as 'big bangs': they spatter the initial matter that is later reassembled into various objects.

*8) Over the years your works have been exhibited in several occasions both in Israel and abroad, including five solo shows. Interesting fact is that you became an active figure in the street-art scene after already exhibiting works in museums and galleries, and not the other way around. Your actions in public spaces are strictly connected to the chance of establishing a direct involvement with the viewers, who are called to evolve from a mere spectatorship to conscious participants on an intellectual level, so before leaving this conversation I would like to pose a question about the nature of the relationship of your art with your audience. Do you consider the issue of audience reception as being a crucial component of your decision-making process, in terms of what type of language is used in a particular context?*

The first time I put works in public space was in 2009. I was looking for an intimate yet direct way to exhibit drawings and poems from a series called "Red Heart". It was a spontaneous act, a different, one-time way to engage with art. Or so I thought. I fell in love with the immediacy and with the outspoken contact to people that the streets offered. As I mentioned earlier, I see artworks as having an independent presence. They exist and at the same time they are rebirthed in each dialogue between the artist, the work and the viewer. But as the saying goes, there is a time and a place for everything. Audience reaction is important to me once a work is done and only then. While creating a piece, I don't let external factors distract me. A work must never be influenced by thoughts that are not yet

relevant. Will it be accepted, will people understand or appreciate, and for that matter, whether or not it will be sold - these questions can only hinder the flow of a work as it becomes all that it can be. Once a work is accomplished, and only then, do I look for a place for it in the world. And when a work is out there, pursuing fulfillment, that is when the viewer's involvement plays an important role.

Naturally, when I create site-specific interventions, choosing a visual language that refers to a particular context is indispensable. Audience reception might act as a factor in this case, as long as it's connected to the essential core and function of a work. In a way, street-art works on all of these levels. In public spaces I ask questions regarding awareness and submergence, whether the representation of the personal could ever exist out there, not to mention create a moment of mindfulness for a passerby. That is why I always try to be open and in the moment myself, create with the same intention I wish to convey through the work.

A very important question in my practice is how genuine is a work. By that I mean that it should be more than a well executed setting for a concept. A work must be comprehensive. It doesn't necessarily relate to the length of a process, nor how elaborate it is. A work can take 10 minutes or a year to make. It has to do with precision, intentions and how well these are rooted in the actual context of the work's meaning. What I'm saying is that I strive to practice what I preach and create with the same intention I wish to convey through the work. So if a work is supposed to encourage awareness, I make sure to be open and absorbent in order to reflect the specific atmosphere that was around me at the time of creating the work. And if a work is about assimilation, I'm deliberately getting lost in the urban mess.

*9) Among your recent remarkable experiences, it's important to mention your participation at the TEDx TelAvivWomen, an important occasion where you spoke about the making of "SPARK" and we would suggest our reader to watch it In particular, we have appreciated your inquiry about the role of randomness and uncertainty in the creative process, so we would like to ask you how do you convey the creative potential of chance into your works, that are marked out with such strong coherence.*

In my TEDx talk I tried to summarize a year-long process of creating a completely new body of works for my fifth solo exhibition. I knew that it was going to be a Sisyphean process and I knew that there were expectations as to what I'll do, though the gallery owner kindly made sure not to pronounce them. Still I decided to take the word NEW quite literally and surprise myself by creating in a new way. The challenge was set - I wanted to go through this process while inventing a methodical way to flexibility, change and random potential. Since my actions can be monotonous at times (as mentioned earlier, 6 months of weaving strands of wool or puncturing 2000 tiny holes in a single sheet of paper), I had to find a way not to succumb to mechanical actions. I set myself the goal of maintaining a coherent intention without controlling and over-analyzing it. The solution I found to all of the above



was to combine simple "body tricks" with "letting go" and embracing serendipity. I used sensory synthesis - I divided my attention between the senses of touch, hearing and sight. For example, the pressure of the pencil between my fingers, the texture of the paper under my arm, the floor beneath my bare feet, the sounds I made as well as the noises that came from the window that faced the street. I also used drawing techniques such as moving back and forth between focus and de-focus, opening and shutting my eyes, and combined those with noticing how the light and shadows moved on the walls around me, during the passing of the day.

I've noticed that when I paid attention to everything simultaneously, my focus expanded and yet I was more engaged in the act itself. Furthermore, I could keep every moment noticeable. This made my artistic experience an ever-changing one rather than a repetitive one, and this sensation of change was infused in my work. Another amazing realization was that this method was actually more effective for concentration. Not to mention that since I actively directed my attention to what I would normally filter out as distractions, it made my process that much more authentic, which in turn was reflected in the energy of the piece.

*10) Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Maya. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects. How do you see your work evolving?*

Thank you for this thought provoking discourse, it was a pleasure.

These days I'm working on an installation for the Israel Museum of Art, that would be exhibited in May. Later on this year and leading to 2017 I'll be embarking on a global social-art project that will generate an exchange of ideas, messages and life lessons between parallel communities in faraway places, beginning with the USA. This project will also include a street-art tour as well as other events. Then, back to Israel in 2017-18, for a planned new solo exhibition at the launching of the renovated Ramat-Gan Museum of Art.

As for evolving... It's definitely ongoing as we speak. I'm currently in a trans-formative phase so I can't say for sure where it will take me and how things will unfold, but I'm very much excited and looking forward to find out.